

# SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS ON LEARNING ENGLISH

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**Abstract.** *The article questions the interaction between language and culture learning. The purpose of the paper is to evaluate the importance of sociocultural factors on learning English as a foreign language. Thus, learners of English need to establish a wider view of the language, considering the features of the culture it is utilized. The major objective of a sociocultural approach is to prepare learners for intercultural communication and dialogue between cultures. The sociocultural strategies might be seen as one of the most efficient ways for learners to achieve sociocultural competence within English language communicative competence.*

**Keywords:** *sociocultural factors, English, cultural competence, fluency.*

Our usual educational experiences are enriched by learning in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms because we learn from others whose beliefs are different than ours. We learn to communicate effectively and respectfully with individuals of varied backgrounds. The use of language is unavoidable during the communication process. Thus, understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar and phonology, but also certain features of the culture where it is used. Consequently, when language learners do not share the same sociocultural background, they tend to have misunderstandings. Since every culture has its own norms for conversation, the communication gap that occurs among multiple learners needs to be closed.

In accounting for a wider view of language, consideration of the sociocultural aspects of the teaching of English is crucial. In this sense, it is possible to say that the cultures involved in the language learning process might have shared or different aspects which may facilitate cognitive associations or make the process problematic [1].

These studies have contributed, from different perspectives, to understanding the relationships between language and culture. In this exploration, we try to shed some light on influence of the language on culture and vice versa. The term sociocultural contains two ideas: (1) Culture is understood as a collection of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles that constitute an objective hierarchy and which produce and accept certain discourses and activities[2]. Hence, the culture is composed by various elements which, as a whole, model the behavior of the participants in a group, and such elements can also make the group perceive reality in different ways and have different interests regarding the place they occupy within society [3] (2) The social side of the sociocultural concept, in agreement with Bourdieu[4], is understood as an objective structure that tends to reproduce through institutions like family, education, marketing and so on. Then reality becomes naturalized in the human interaction, and this fact makes it recognizable as common sense. A flurry of cognitive science research is showing that in fact, language does profoundly influence how we see the world. The question of whether languages shape the way we think goes back centuries when Charlemagne proclaimed that “to have a second language is to have a second soul” [5].

The relationship between culture and language are deeply rooted. Language learning and culture learning are linked and interconnected, so one can't be separate from the other. To speak English well, one should be able to think in this language, and thoughts are extremely powerful. If language is a soul of the country, then in order to be fluent in English, learners need to understand the culture and the mentality of English speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, The United States, Australia, New Zealand and etc. The importance of sociocultural factors in learning English are widely discussed and described as a vital aspect. Specialized knowledge of how a British or American culture is organized, the value systems, interpersonal relationships, adaptations to the environment as well as greater understanding of visible manifestations of the abovementioned cultures are necessary. It is undeniable that even understanding the foreign cultural setting may not guarantee the fluency in both the culture and the language itself. The vocabulary of our language in some sense reflects what

we choose to name in our thinking. Full meaning of a typical individual word is the result of experience that a learner has with that word in the cultural setting he or she has grown up. For example, the word “friendship” will not mean the same to people who lived in two different societies. Thus, learning a language implies not merely the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar rules but involves the sociocultural factors.

Language and culture appear on the surface to be two distinct fields, but they have an intertwined relationship and affect each other mutually. Gleason indicated that languages are not only the products of cultures, but also are the symbols of cultures [6]. The development of a language frequently affects the associated culture, and cultural patterns of cognition and custom are often explicitly coded in language. Having said that, it is important to mention the thought of Lado who wrote in his book *Linguistics across Cultures*, “if certain elements of a second language differ greatly from the student’s native language, that student is likely encounter difficulties” [7]. Learning of any foreign language is facilitated whenever there are similarities between that language and the learner’s mother tongue because languages usually have differences of syntax, pronunciation, and structure. It is through cultural support and understanding that the diversities of languages can be resolved and students’ learning stresses can be reduced.

The major objective of a sociocultural approach is to prepare learners for intercultural communication and dialogue between cultures. The sociocultural strategies might be seen as one of the most efficient ways for learners to achieve sociocultural competence within English language communicative competence. While learning English, students build not only language but also cultural competence. In addition to that, it is important to immerse the experience of both the learning activity and diversity exploration. The personal and academic growth these two processes offer are unequalled. English being utilized in almost every corner of the world has established the idea of acquiring the status of language that the global community interacts. Study abroad programs in the USA, UK or any other English native country would be of significant importance for learners. Cultural involvement in the language learning process serves to deliver the most of the foreign language acquisition. Living and studying in another country contributes to applying the skills to real life experience. Studying English out of your home country is totally different from studying it in America or England. Students’ sociocultural environment affects how they make sense of reading and writing in English. The sociocultural context varies from print environment to print environment, from classroom to classroom, and from community to community; however, each helps define the meaning of any given text.

The intercultural competency skills young people acquire are directly related to how they interact with others to make meaning from text or to solve problems within specific sociocultural environments. Learners internalize the kind of help they receive from others and subsequently use what they have learned to direct their own meaning-making and problem-solving behaviors. Thus an ideal classroom environment will create opportunities for students to engage in collaborative activities involving thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing based upon their interests and life experiences. Within such a classroom, English language learners can express and obtain knowledge in ways that will enable them to acquire and negotiate meaning.

The major instructional goal for a teacher should be to make the classroom an environment in which many language activities can take place and in which students can use their prior knowledge and experiences to understand and practice different types of cultural settings and the interaction of language with culture. Through the process of enculturation a person masters a culture and learns to speak a particular language. The entire knowledge of world’s culture lies in the language. The impact of language and the sociocultural factors in learning English is that of a relationship among language, culture and society in an entire context. This expanded view of language also makes educational experience more engaging for students. Knowledge of cultures is important for facilitating communication with people from different countries. Therefore learners of languages need to learn about and understand cultures. Understanding culture as practices with which people engage becomes centrally important which means that in the language classroom it is not just a question of learners developing knowledge about another culture but of learners coming to understand themselves in relation to some other culture. This is why there is a contemporary emphasis on “intercultural competency skills”.

Learners need to become familiar with how they can personally engage with linguistic and cultural diversity. People use language for purposeful communication and learning a new language involves not just learning how to use words, rules and knowledge about language and its use in order to communicate with speakers of the language but also the cultural background of the natives. It is something that people do in their daily lives and something they use to express, create and interpret

meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships. As a system of personal engagement with a new world, where learners necessarily engage with diversity at a personal level, being fluent in English and the British-American culture provides with opportunities of academic and professional success.

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